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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BEIRUT 000416

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: TOP SHIA CLERIC URGES USG INVOLVEMENT IN
LEBANON

Classified By: Jeffrey D. Feltman, Ambassador. Reason: 1.4 (d)

SUMMARY

11. (C) In the course of a friendly 3/20 meeting, Lebanon's top official Shia religious cleric urged the USG to take an active and direct role in Lebanon's political crisis, as the Lebanese parties have reached an impasse they cannot overcome. This role could consist of pressuring the Lebanese parties to compromise. Alternatively, the USG could organize other powerful countries, in particular the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, to sponsor a settlement. The spiritual leader also proposed a lunch for the five countries' ambassadors and a joint communique announcing a proposal for a deal to end the crisis. As for the tribunal, the Shia parties are in favor of it in principle, but their desired amendments and their objections to taking action on it immediately remain unclear. The opposition's resort to street protests and its 110-day old sit-in were mistakes, but they should be forgiven in the context of "turning a new page" in Lebanon. End Summary.

FOR THE TRIBUNAL

12. (SBU) Sheikh Abd al-Amir Qabalan, Acting Chief of the Higher Shia Islamic Council, invited the Ambassador for a meeting at the Council's headquarters in the southern Beirut suburbs of Borj el Barajneh March 20. Polchief and Poladvisor accompanied the Ambassador as notetakers. Qabalan greeted the USG representatives warmly and ushered us in while a dozen cameramen filmed a lengthy video and photo spray.

13. (SBU) When Qabalan finally waved the cameras out, the Ambassador told him that the USG would support a solution to Lebanon's political crisis that a majority of Lebanese support. The USG is neither coaching March 14 to obstruct a settlement or otherwise perpetuating the crisis, as opposition media have alleged. The sole USG redline, the Ambassador continued, is the requirement to establish an international tribunal with true judicial integrity and authority. On this topic, we are encouraged to see that Mustaqbal Party leader Saad Hariri and Chamber of Deputies Speaker Nabih Berri are discussing the tribunal. Furthermore, it is far better for the Lebanese to establish the tribunal themselves through Lebanon's constitutional

process than to rely on the international community to establish it via a Chapter VII resolution of the UN Security Council.

14. (C) Qabalan replied that "we all have to work together to solve Lebanon's problems," indicating with a sweep of his hand that he intended to include his USG guests in moving the country forward. The issues are complicated and there are many obstacles that work against national unity. However "we all agree on the survival of a Lebanon patriotic, independent, and without foreign interference." Lebanon has lived through enough crises created by the interference of foreign powers. Qabalan continued, in saying, "We reject foreign interference and want to keep our borders sacrosanct. At the same that we reject the elimination of any of Lebanon's other parties, we reject their elimination of us, the Shia. We are looking for the salvation of Lebanon.".

15. (SBU) We are not against the tribunal, Qabalan said, and he repeated this assertion several times. Assassinated former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri was a martyr for all of Lebanon and for Islam, a bridgebuilder among communities. Qabalan had met with Saad Hariri and shared his grief after his father's assassination, he told us, and had asked Saad to forgive his father's murderers.

16. (C) Nevertheless, the opposition has some "remarks" on the establishment of the court. Then what, asked the Ambassador, are the opposition's remarks, or objections, to the tribunal? If they are, as Speaker Berri maintains, minor, then why would he not tell March 14 (or, for that matter, the public) what they are? Why would Shia ministers walk out of the cabinet on November 11, 2006, over a mere two-day advancement of the cabinet vote on the tribunal? Why did they walk out

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before (in December 2005) over the tribunal issue?

17. (C) Qabalan did not answer these questions directly and gave no appearance of knowing the opposition's exact objections. He noted, though, that Berri and Hariri appeared to have come close to an agreement on the makeup of the committee that would examine the tribunal and prepare for its enactment by an expanded cabinet. When the Ambassador asked why the committee could not be activated immediately, however, Qabalan had no direct answer. He noted however that Saad Hariri had left Lebanon again (to travel to France to be awarded the "Legion d'Honneur" by President Chirac). In general, with agreements such as the tribunal, "the devil is in the details." Qabalan appealed, though, for a shift in focus away from the past, and to "turn a new page" to heal Lebanon's wounds. All parties in Lebanon, including the Shia parties, have made numerous errors and it is time for a new start.

SEEKING USG INVOLVEMENT

18. (C) Qabalan declared that the Shia of Lebanon have no interest in conflict with the United States. To the contrary, they desire friendship and cooperation with the United States. Qabalan raised the alarm on three dangers for Lebanon: 1) a break-up of the country into confessional cantons; 2) the looming possibility of two dueling presidencies -- and even two cabinets -- if no political solution is found before the end of President Lahoud's term, and 3) the possibility of nationalization of the Palestinian refugees. After asserting that no solution to the three great problems could be concluded without the agreement of the USG, he gradually warmed up to his request: that the United States should be directly involved in forging a solution in Lebanon.

19. (C) The United States is the great power, he reasoned. Only the United States can bring the parties together in Lebanon with equanimity and while guaranteeing adherence to

democracy and human rights. In return, a solution in Lebanon could contribute to favorable outcomes in Iraq (which is "semi-linked" to Lebanon, he said) and the War on Terror. The Shia of Lebanon and the USG share an interest in eliminating terrorism, Qabalan concluded, citing the Palestinian group Fatah al-Islam (which had just been indicted for bombing two commuter buses in February) and the Salafeen, Sunni extremists suspected of receiving foreign aid to prepare for future terror attacks.

¶10. (C) Lebanon's problems are in no one's interest except those of Israel, Qabalan continued, and the parties to the current squabbles need to leave their gangs and plans for street action and "return to the light." The USG should push them in that direction, while carefully avoiding the perception that we are favoring one party over another. The U.S. Embassy should take the lead in organizing the Ambassadors of all the powerful countries -- Qabalan then named the five permanent members (P-5) of the Security Council -- to push the Lebanese parties into a solution. Finally, the Lebanese already believe the United States is involved in Lebanon's crisis; the USG might as well get involved for real. Qabalan's aide remarked that many Lebanese believe that their leaders are waiting for an "American solution."

CABINET POLITICS

¶11. (C) The Sheikh noted that all the parties in Lebanon agree on which problems require solutions: the National Unity Government (NUG), tribunal, election law, presidential election, economic reforms, social reforms, and sovereignty vis-a-vis Israel. After 110 days of a sit-in in the downtown street, not one of the matters has been settled. When Poladviser suggested that Hizballah and Amal might begin by leaving the street as a goodwill gesture, Qabalan reminded us that he had been the first to speak out against a resort to street protests. (Indeed, we were told separately by a Shia former MP that Qabalan had a shouting match with Hizballah and Amal representatives during a monthly Shia political-spiritual meeting the previous day, accusing the

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two opposition groups of bringing a destructive conflict down on Lebanon's Shia community.)

¶12. (C) The Ambassador said that no one is opposed to the NUG, but that the dispute comes down to the details. The cabinet formula proposed by the Arab League -- 19 ministers for the majority, 10 for the opposition and one independent minister who would pledge not to vote except to join consensus -- appears to offer the opposition the guarantees it wishes that no decisions can be taken without its consent. He noted that during the entire history of the Siniora cabinet every decision had been taken by consent (with the exception of two decisions on the tribunal and one decision on a UNIFIL Maritime Task Force, in which the Hizballah and Amal ministers split their votes), and that such a guarantee would seem less important, but that the League's proposal appeared to offer it nonetheless. The opposition's 19-11 cabinet demand would appear to offer the opposition the chance to dissolve the cabinet at will. Qabalan insisted the opposition wanted only "participation" in the cabinet, and his aide objected to the 19-10-1 formula on grounds that that the Lebanese constitution does not provide for "non-voting" ministers.

¶13. (C) We are living in a sensitive time, Qabalan said, and the Ambassador agreed, adding that should the USG express its views openly or advocate for one solution or another we would certainly offend one of the parties. Hizballah already blames the United States for any March 14 message or position that does not suit its purposes. An example of why the USG must take care in Lebanon is the dispute over the Ministerial Declaration. The pro-government, March 14 side has hinted

that should a new cabinet be formed, it would not agree to renew the current Ministerial Declaration, which dates from July 2005 and stipulates near-unconditional support for Hizballah's armed "resistance" to Israel. The opposition side clearly wants the Declaration renewed as is. Should either side seek the USG's view, we would agree with the pro-government side that a Declaration giving Hizballah the authority to make terror attacks and drag Lebanon into a war is unacceptable. As a result, we would surely be accused of interference in Lebanon's affairs.

¶14. (C) Qabalan insisted the opposition did not seek to reopen the issue of the Ministerial Declaration but only to enlarge the cabinet to ensure its own participation. Alternatively, Qabalan suggested, the cabinet could be shrunk to an interim government of five, six or seven ministers, distributed among parties and confessions. Such a government would need only take the country to presidential elections later this year. Given that the country will in any case have to form a new government following the presidential election this fall, perhaps it would be better to spare the country the turmoil of building an elaborate catch-all cabinet now.

RESTORING TRUST

¶15. (C) The Ambassador asked how such a feat could be accomplished when there is so little trust left between the two sides, and how he would help to rebuild such trust. Qabalan said that he would ask each of the sides to carry out a peaceful rapprochement. A joint announcement from the opposing sides to work toward common goals would be a good beginning. He also plans to hold a "spiritual summit" soon, when the Council relocates to its renovated headquarters in Hazmieh. The Sheikh jokingly asked the Ambassador whether he would prefer to attend in a white or a black ceremonial robe. Returning to seriousness, however, Qabalan asserted that the USG alone could play the role of reconciling the two sides without becoming a party to the conflict.

¶16. (C) We have made clear our support for the Arab League initiative to solve Lebanon's crisis and have also supported the Saudi-Iranian negotiating track, the Ambassador responded, but have studiously avoided any intervention that puts us in the center and that makes the United States the story. If the USG were a party, and one participant or the other in the dispute wanted to block progress, it becomes all too easy to blame us. In any event, Hizballah would never accept an American role. To this, Qabalan said that Speaker

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Nabih Berri is the "negotiator" for the opposition. We turn to the foreigners because there is no confidence left between us, he said.

A P-5 LUNCH AND COMMUNIQUE

¶17. (C) Qabalan then asked the Ambassador whether he would attend if Qabalan invited the P-5 Ambassadors in Lebanon to have a lunch discussion together, after which they would appear before the cameras and endorse a joint statement (which would have been prepared in advance). The Ambassador responded that Lebanon already enjoys the undisputed support of the P-5 countries and that if the statement was a general one about support for Lebanon's sovereignty, democracy, and independence, those countries would probably support it. However, it might be harder to get agreement to endorse a more specific, or more detailed, solution. Nevertheless, when pressed by Qabalan, the Ambassador pledged to continue the Embassy's public support for the broad themes of a Lebanese solution -- dialogue, unity, reform, etc.

TALKING TO LAHOUD?

¶18. (C) In an almost sermonizing tone, Qabalan inquired whether the Ambassador talks to or pays calls on President Lahoud. The Ambassador explained that although President Lahoud holds his letter of credentials, implying some de facto recognition, our communication with the President has been sparse. Confirming that the Ambassador had recently met with Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea, Qabalan asked whether it was for Geagea's sake that the Embassy had no contact with Lahoud. When the Ambassador replied in the negative, Qabalan urged him to visit Lahoud. (Note: Although these remarks came in the context of a discussion about national reconciliation, Qabalan's interest in our non-relationship with Lahoud was unclear and we did not seek a further explanation. However, it was not the first time that Qabalan had asked the Ambassador this question. End Note.)

COMMENT

¶19. (C) While given as an almost passing comment, Qabalan's reference to the possibility of two competing cabinets was a disturbing reminder that the pro-Syrian opposition figures have not yet reached the bottom of their bag of tricks. Under such a scenario, Emile Lahoud, insisting on the unconstitutionality of the Siniora cabinet given the lack of Shia representation, would twist the constitutional consultative process to allow him to appoint a new cabinet. Pro-Syrian jurists such as Salim Jeressaiti and Naji Boustany are probably already busy with inventing legal justifications for Lahoud to take this step. Such a cabinet would not be able to get parliamentary blessing, of course, as long as the March 14 majority and unity hold within the Chamber of Deputies. But the lack of a parliamentary vote of confidence would not stop certain political leaders and even foreign envoys from paying calls on the Lahoud-appointed PM and cabinet, raising further questions over the legitimacy of the Siniora cabinet. (We wonder if our UN colleagues, always eager to appear "neutral," would visit both cabinets. We fear they would.)

¶20. (C) We doubt that Qabalan is playing a significant role in setting opposition strategy, and he seemed sincere in seeking a way out of the crisis. But, in talking of dueling cabinets, he senses that things could get worse here before they get better. Ironically, after practically begging for a strong USG role in helping to forge a solution, Qabalan told the press after meeting his USG visitors that any foreign intervention in Lebanon is unacceptable.

FELTMAN